

The

March 2003

Ballarat Naturalist



Brown Falcon
(Hill)

The Hawk and the Hunter

Martin Scuffins: Central Highlands Bird of Prey Shelter

Birds of prey are characterised by a sharp beak, large sharp talons and reverse sexual dimorphism (i.e. the female is larger than the male). Their flight is geared towards great manoeuvrability—gliding, chasing birds, stooping on prey, hovering etc. In relation to their body size the wings are relatively small, such as the peregrine falcon's, and the feathers adapted to the particular hunting methods e.g. the barn owl's soft, barbed feathers ensure its silent approach. Martin illustrated his points with shots of each feather.

The birds' eyesight is excellent; falcons and kestrels' distance vision is comparable to humans; all have the additional advantage of seeing in the UV spectrum which enables them to follow scent trails and denies their prey the advantage of camouflage when parts of the fur or feathers are seen in these wavelengths. A Wedgetailed Eagle can see 1500m. Raptors possess highly developed lens muscles which allow them to fix on moving objects with great accuracy. Head bobbing and weaving enhance their perception of distance by moving the object of interest across the retina.

Birds of prey, especially eagles, have featured in the mythology of many cultures, often as symbols of power: Indian headdresses and the figures on totem poles come to mind. Some of these birds could be trained to catch prey for their human masters, and falconry has been known since at least 1700 BC. This sport, typical of Europe, Britain and the Middle East, peaked in the Middle Ages and was governed by strict rules of ownership depending on the owner's social status. Eagles were for kings, falcons for the nobility, goshawks for yeomen. Even our present-day vocabulary contains words originating from the keeping of falcons, such as *mews*, a place where the birds were kept indoors.

Falconry has recently undergone a revival in the UK, USA and Middle East, but is not appropriate to Australian ecology where it would be too difficult to manage.

The white settlement of Australia has resulted in habitat changes with the development of agriculture, the spread of urbanisation and the introduction of cats. Birds of prey were seen as threats and for a while there was a bounty on Wedge-tailed Eagles; however they are now protected.

Man's activities result in injuries to the birds. Barbed wire fences inflict horrendous injuries, vehicle impacts are common and Martin euthanases 60% of birds brought to him.

A break-down of the injuries he sees are:

35% cause unknown

33% found at roadside and assumed to be powerline & vehicle collisions.

8% known vehicle impact .

2% barbed wire fence entanglement.

10% starvation, poor condition.

2% flying into window.

2% cat attack.

Occasionally there is the odd "mistaken rescue" where a young bird is waiting for its parent and is not in fact abandoned.

Falconry training can be used as physiotherapy when rehabilitating injured birds. Jesses are put on the bird and a lure is used to encourage the bird in its activities. Martin has used pins and Araldite to mend tail feathers—which eventually moult and new, sound ones grow. He showed us shots of a Boobook with head injuries, a goshawk with its wing torn by barbed wire, and regaled us with anecdotes on the treatment of various birds, some of which inflicted injuries on him with their sharp talons!



Boobook
(Hill)



Peregrine Falcon
(Hill)

The birds are housed in shadecloth aviaries, the material preventing their feathers from becoming damaged (as wire netting would do). An aviary 35' long x 12' high x 15' wide permits birds to exercise, especially the bird-chasing species. Perching blocks are topped with Astroturf which Martin finds is hygienic.

Detailed records are kept for each bird on its training, food, weight and so on. Thus experience is built up and can be shared.

Martin feels that we humans have a moral obligation to assist injured birds since it is often our activities which have caused them. National Parks are by no means the whole answer to bird protection since much of their habitat is on private land; he commends the *Land for Wildlife* movement. Birds of prey are high in the food chain and need to be monitored due to the possible accumulation of poisons—the DDT debacle a case in point where the concentration of the poison eventually resulted in soft-shelled eggs being laid which were smashed when the birds sat to incubate them. Martin concluded his talk with the case of the Caracara (on Guadeloupe Island off the Californian coast) which was deemed a pest when Angora goats were farmed there, and the last ones were shot in 1900.

Australian Naturalists Network Get-together at Launceston

November 2002

This was the 2nd Get-Together of the Australian Naturalist Network (Alice Springs 2000) with the Launceston FNC members the hosts. A very comprehensive program was arranged over 3 weeks for 65 participants who came from Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania. The process that was used for the 1st ANN was repeated: a fully accommodated & catered for 4 day tour during the 1st and 3rd weeks while the Core Program of 10 days was day excursions out from Launceston, led by local FN people. At the Dinner at the end of the Core Program arrangements for the next ANN were handed over to members of Western Australia Naturalist Clubs in 2004. (They omit the 'Field' in their title much to the amusement of many!)

The area that was covered extended from Coles Bay on the east coast to Arthur River on the west coast - in fact, it seemed that we visited every coastal heathland, rainforest, fern gully, waterfall, National Park and State Reserve that was possible! Some commercial ventures provided specialist interest: the Seahorse World at Beauty Point; Bicheno Bird & Animal Park for Tasmanian snakes and the Tasmanian tiger; St Helens Historical Museum for further information about early tin mining and logging; the Eco Forest Centre at Scottsdale; the Tamar Wetlands Centre; Arthur River Reflections for a day cruise on this longest of Tasmanian rivers; Gunns Plains limestone cave and an assault on the Nut at Stanley.

As is usual amongst FN people, the expertise of so many enabled a wonderful resource: authors of books on Tasmanian Eucalypts & Australian Acacias, Flora of Cradle Mountain was launched when we were there and Fungi in the West; Tasmanian orchids especially tree orchids (one orchid is named after a Launceston FN); botanists, an invertebrate zoologist, biologists, science teachers and lecturers and several volunteers to state Herbariums; a couple who have a refuge for birds of prey - at the time an injured sea eagle. The invaluable perspective that the geologist

gives has brought a new dimension to my seeing the natural world.

The Launceston FNC was bequeathed a property at Myrtle Bank some 34 kilometres SE from Launceston - the John Skemp Field Centre. This unique property has remnant rainforest trees, fern gullies, many walking trails into different habitats and a building with amenities for group accommodation & meetings. A day was spent at this site.

Our 3 weeks stay was made with fine weather, even to a day of blue skies when we visited Cradle Mountain. Just the same, northern Tasmania was noticeably affected by the dry conditions experienced throughout eastern Australia. Water levels in rivers and streams weren't obviously lower to our eyes but the fern gullies and rainforests were dry under foot though still very lush and green. Liffey Falls had a special appeal. The range and quantity of flowers in the coastal heathlands was low and often disappointing. The Bridport Wildflower Reserve on the NE coast was impressive and gave us an expectation that more of the same was to follow. A windy afternoon at the Tamar Wetlands Reserve prevented the opportunity of sighting many birds. Low tide at Low Head, Eastern Tamar gave an exciting viewing of 4 different types of crabs but created a long walk to see waders.

Launceston has an interesting geology - the Cataract Gorge and the re-alignment of the South Esk, the formation of the North and South Esk Rivers with the Tamar River the estuary being a tributary of the Yarra (or as the locals said, the Yarra is a tributary of the Tamar!) - explaining the very different scenery and habitats on either side of the Tamar. On our excursions, over several days, we saw different aspects of the one river: the catchment area in the highlands with the forests, fern gullies and waterfalls and then the lower reaches, the coastal plains and estuaries, e.g. the Arthur River in the north-west, the South Esk and smaller rivers on the east coast.

Margaret Tonkin.

February Meeting Points

43 members and visitors were welcomed by the President.

- Carol brought opening of Yarrowee Trail on March 1st to members' notice.
- rise in room hire from \$11 to \$16.50.
- book sales now over \$4500.
- Reminder about VFNCA Urban Camp - deadline Feb. 10.

Show and Tell

- Lyndsay - photocopy of old photo showing F.Nats - male - (not us) exploring beach - nude!
- Greg - asked members to help themselves to spare copies of Parks info. etc. he had cleared out.
- Carol Hall - Mt. Feathertop bushfire photos and general alpine shots around Hotham.

Field Reports

- Lyndsay Fink - Full grown Wedge-tailed Eagle on hay bale.
- Joan Riddell - numerous 5-spot ladybirds.
- Tony Johns - Yellow-billed Spoonbill, pair Stubble Quail at Colignan.
- Del McDonnell - pair black-chinned honeyeaters at Shepherds Flat.
- Ken McDonnell - masses of copulating stinkbugs.
- Frank Harrap - Brown Falcon in home block 3rd Feb roosting. Birds falling from trees in the extreme heat of Jan 25th. (42°C). Grey Fantail at birdbath - normally 500m away.
- Greg Binns - Aus. Hobby snatched Sparrow from a vineyard in Cathcart St. Buninyong.
- Ken Hammond - Black Kite in Wendouree mid-Dec. Musk Lorikeets arriving in W'ree now.
- Carol Hall - Black and Painted Honeyeaters in Clunes State Forest. White-necked Heron at Convent Corner, Lake W'ree.
- Maureen Christie - in NSW bush birds from the hills have come down to the coast, presumably due to the drought. Some white cockatoos blackened by fire.
- Margaret Tonkin - at Apollo Bay possible bush rat at feeding table eating seed.
- Paul Norquay - Mt. Egerton - Black-shouldered Kite in dead tree; Goshawk in chook yard and catching mice and blackbirds; Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo eating Hakea seed (and pruning the plants!)
- Les Hanrahan - Bungaree - 7 Pelicans, 2 Yellow-billed Spoonbills and Great Egrets on dam.
- Bob Curtain - Alfredton - 2 Eastern Rosellas on neighbour's tree.
- Trish Hughes - Sturt St. West - Eastern Spinebill sighted in garden 7/2/03 first time this year. Last year they arrived on 6/2/03.

Water on the Web

The UN General Assembly has proclaimed 2003 to be the International Year of Freshwater (IYF). The Year is designed to encourage all people involved in freshwater issues to increase general awareness of the importance of sustainable freshwater use, management and protection. IYF calls for governments, organisations, NGOs and the private sector to make voluntary contributions and to lend other forms of support to the Year.

www.wateryear2003.org

(from Environment Victoria's newsletter)

CD-ROM Plants and Animals of the Box-Ironbark Area of Central Victoria

Launched on December 6th 2002 in Castlemaine, this CD is a joint project of the Bendigo, Maryborough and Castlemaine FNCs. Money was raised from local and state government agencies, and Viridans Biological Databases was contracted to produce the CD to the clubs' specifications. Future developments have been divided into three areas, viz. sales; updating, acquisition and collection of data; education—lobbying education departments to develop a curriculum unit to use the CD and similar products.

The CD is available to members at \$45 plus \$5 p.&p. The price to the public is \$49.95 plus p.&p. if required. (Information courtesy *Whirrakee*, Bendigo FNC newsletter).

The existence of such a guide in CD format enables updates to be made more readily than if it were a book, and may have greater appeal to children if used as part of the school curriculum. However a book is still more practical to use in the field; the recently released *Victoria's Box-Ironbark Forests* by the Calders (updated from *The Forgotten Forests*) remains a more accessible guide for plants.

Editor.

Blue-billed Duck

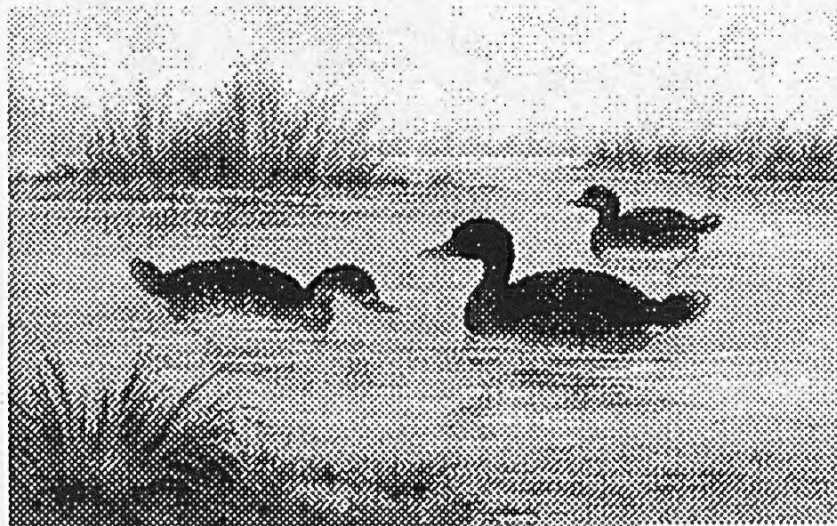
With these ducks readily visible on Lake Wendouree, readers may find the following extract from Valda Dedman's article in the Geelong FNC's newsletter of February 2003 of interest.

"They nest at Lake Wendouree. Jack Wheeler was one of the first to describe their courting rituals. Frith (1967) describes them in *Waterfowl of Australia*, from Wheeler's notes:

In an open pool and in the presence of the female the male splashes backwards suddenly with both feet and then springs erect, almost standing on the tail, with the head and bill pressed into the breast feathers. In this position the head and bill are rapidly jerked up and down. Finally the male gives a shallow dive and then the whole sequence is repeated several times. Suddenly the body is straightened out, and with the tail erect as a fan, the bird rocks vigorously up and down, dipping the head in and out of the water. The performance concludes with submerging the head and tail, arching the back, and skidding backwards for several feet. No other duck is quite as spectacular as this.

Copulation follows a vigorous chase; the male pursues the female across the pool at high speed and often completely underwater. They frequently surface and fight in a flurry of water for a second or two, then submerge and rush on. Finally the male is able to, or allowed to, overtake, and copulation is effected with the female completely submerged. Finally the birds separate and vigorously preen the whole body.

When breeding the males are aggressive and chase each other with neck feathers ruffled.....The male is... polygamous. He takes no part in making the nest or rearing the young, but as soon as the chicks are out on the water, he is pestering the female again. She is not averse to his attention and soon mates. The young are independent very early. They leave the nest within 24 hours and then the female often 'parks' them in a safe spot for another couple of weeks. The ducklings always feed themselves, either by diving or 'suzzling', on the surface, with the female nearby. She will hiss at intruders.



Blue-billed
Duck
(Cayley)

Male on
right fore-
ground.

The nest is made in old dense unburned reed beds, occasionally lignum or tea-tree low over water. It is a deep bowl with a domed hood made of interwoven leaves pulled down from surrounding vegetation. 5-6 eggs are usually laid—they are oval, palest green but soon discoloured.

Water is their element; when disturbed they prefer to dive rather than fly. Only the legs are used for propulsion when diving and swimming underwater. The birds like to be out on the open water and nest away from the bank if possible. On land, where they rarely venture, they are clumsy. Most of their food is gathered by diving down to the bottom mud. Mudeyes, midge and caddisfly larvae are favourite food items.

The Blue-billed Duck is a strangely silent bird, most of whose noise comes from splashing and thrashing of the water with its large feet. This can be heard up to a kilometre away. It does not call in flight. Most calls are made at breeding time. The male gives a very low, deep *dunk dunk dunk* or a soft shrill *chee chee chee*. The female gives 'a soft hiccupping gargle' when rebuffing the mate."

Calendar

March

- Fri. 14 FNCB AGM and Members' Slides "*On Terra Firma*".
Sun. 16 Excursion: Beachcombing at Pt. Roadknight. Leaders—committee.
Leave Creswick Plaza 9 am. Meet Surf Beach carpark, Anglesea at 10.45 am.
Tues. 25 Committee Meeting @ Carol's 5 Elizabeth St. Wendouree. 7.30 pm

April

- Fri. 4 Dr. Kevin Tolhurst: *Habitat Changes as a Result of Fire*.
Sun. 6 Excursion: Blakeville Fire Research Plots with Dr. Kevin Tolhurst.

Supper Duty: **March:** Helen Burgess & Fran Hanrahan
 April: Eileen Anderson & Kay Preston
 May: Trish Hughes

Committee

President	Mrs. Carol Hall	03 5339 2255
Vice-President	Mr. Greg Binns	03 5333 2282
Secretary	Mr. John Gregurke	03 5339 4993
Treasurer	Mr. Bob Curtain	03 5334 2642

Miss Helen Burgess.....03 5331 2210
Miss Maureen Christie.....03 5332 6803
Mrs. Claire Dalman.....03 5339 2777
Mrs. Carol Hall (Editor).....03 5339 2255

Mr. Les Hanrahan.....03 5334 7516
Mr. John Mildren.....03 5341 3507
Mrs. Kay Preston.....03 5334 3814

Correspondence: PO. Box 328W, Ballarat West, 3350.

Email: Secretary: jgregurke@giant.net.au

Editor: chall@netconnect.com.au 5 Elizabeth St, Wendouree 3355.

Website: www.ballarat.yourguide.com.au Click on *Local Info*. Search *Environment*.

Meetings are held at the Ballarat Horticultural Centre, cnr. Gregory & Gillies Sts (VicRoads 254 F8) on the first Friday of the month at 7.30pm.

Excursions: Depart from Creswick Plaza, Creswick Rd., Ballarat (VicRoads 255 M10) at 9.30 am unless otherwise specified.

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